

San Fernando Valley Audubon Statement on Fires at Sepulveda Basin

On June 24, 2024, a brush fire started at an illegal encampment in the Sepulveda Basin, resulting in an explosion injuring 11 of our LAFD firefighters, one critically. Initial news reports indicated the presence of multiple explosive devices, including an apparent hand grenade, all within yards of the Hjelte Sports Center playing fields.

The San Fernando Valley Audubon Society (SFVAS) sponsors environmental education programming involving thousands of LAUSD children in the Basin each year, as well as birdwatching and habitat restoration throughout the undeveloped areas of the Sepulveda Basin, Hansen Dam, and foothills. Illegal encampments are all-too common in these areas, and our volunteers and programming participants have experienced occasional frightening and aggressive behavior from encampment occupants. Additionally, fires associated with the encampments are a nearly daily occurrence, and included the 2020 fire which destroyed virtually the entire wildlife area and caused one death. Because these areas are not monitored by authorities, it is quite easy for dangerous materials, such as propane tanks and even explosives, to be stored in the encampments, as was the case in Monday's incident.

We at SFVAS are outraged and have been for some time over this nightmarish situation which endangers everyone in the community. Allowing a handful of people to live and accumulate property, some of it obviously dangerous, in public parks and other fire-prone spaces is unconscionable. We have received feedback from many members of the public who are also outraged and fear for their safety when using the parks. As users of these areas and concerned citizens, there is an urgent need to revise protocols for addressing these encampments in these sensitive areas. A zero-tolerance policy is overdue, with provision for rapid relocation of individuals. As we enter what is sure to be a severe fire season where resources will be stretched thin, we call on our elected officials to address this with the urgency the situation deserves.